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Exploring Skin Related Identity Crisis in Ali Standish's 'How to Disappear Completely'

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the intricate portrayal of skin conditions and their effect on the identity of the main character of Ali Standish's novel, How to Disappear Completely. This study is also a lens through which one may think about how literature charts the course of human life, while simultaneously questioning and reforming society. Despite being an evident societal issue in discussion, contrary to its implementation towards reforming the societal norms is absent. Employing a rigorous and immersive literary analysis, this study has focused on the narrative fabric that embarks on a journey to decipher the multi-dimensional themes of stigma, self-acceptance, and societal prejudice that are masterfully interwoven into the narrative tapestry. The characterization of the protagonist, emphasis on the issues faced by the protagonist through the use of narrative techniques and the use of symbolism and imagery set the parameters for this research's methodological process. The research findings, stemming from this meticulous exploration of text, exemplify the immense potential of literature as a catalyst for empathy and awareness. The language provides deep insight into the difficulties of people dealing with skin problems through submerging its readers in the protagonist's environment. The study serves as a testament to the power of storytelling, offering a platform for those whose stories have often been marginalized or misunderstood. In essence, this study is significant to challenge and disrupt the prevailing narratives around skin conditions, identity, and societal attitudes. Viewing How to Disappear Completely through the perspectives of stigma, self-acceptance, and societal prejudice, the story becomes a symbol of optimism and comprehension.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Skin Conditions, Self-Acceptance, Stigma, Identity

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Introduction

Throughout the literary world, writers often take advantage of storytelling to explore the intricate weave of human experiences. Authors use the skillful creation of characters and stories to explore the complexities of one's identity, how they are seen by society, and how they can learn to accept themselves. In this setting, the depiction of people who are suffering from skin disorders in literature serves as an invaluable platform to express themes such as identity, stigma, and acceptance of oneself with remarkable lucidity.

How to Disappear Completely by Ali Standish takes readers on an enthralling journey with Emma, as she navigates her way through the struggles of living with a visible skin condition. It is an absorbing story of literary exploration. The novel examines the deep connection between physical appearance and the development of character, exploring the emotional complexities of how society perceives us and our never-ending attempt to find our own acceptance. This is seen through Emma's experiences.

This research embarks on a comprehensive literary analysis of the chosen text with a keen focus on the portrayal of skin conditions within the narrative. The purpose of this narrative is to bring attention to the hardships endured by those with skin conditions, as well as to explore the impact of visible differences on identity, the stigma related to them, and the journey of self-empowerment. In doing so, this study offers a lens through which one may think about how literature charts the course of human life, while simultaneously questioning and reforming our societal beliefs and ideas.

As we delve into the pages of "How to Disappear Completely", we venture beyond the realm of fiction into the profound exploration of what it means to grapple with one's own appearance. To confront the judgments of society and ultimately, to embark on a path toward embracing one's authentic self. This literary analysis aims to uncover the various levels of interpretation and importance in the text, demonstrating how these types of stories can help create compassion, comprehension, and the destruction of prejudices linked to physical dissimilarities. Through our exploration, we endeavour to engage with the profound storytelling power of literature, where the written word becomes a bridge between worlds, offering readers the opportunity to traverse the intricate landscapes of the human experience.

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The following pages take us on an exploration of the plot line and characters in How to Disappear Completely, as we analyze the story's themes, to gain a better understanding of the meaningful commentary on identity, stigma and self-acceptance. This research encourages readers to embark on a literary exploration and contemplate how literature can be used to foster greater understanding and sympathy for those with visible disabilities.

This paper provides an overview of the novel, its main topics, and its importance, and encourages the reader to explore how skin ailments are portrayed in literature. The research presented here highlights how literature can be used to evoke empathy, understanding, and the breaking down of stigmas based on physical differences and appearances. It also shows that these themes remain relevant today and are present in literature.

The main focus of the research is on the character of Emma and her struggles with having vitiligo. It does not extensively delve into the perspectives of other characters or subplots within the novel. This research takes a literary perspective, analyzing the narrative elements, symbolism, and literary techniques used in the chosen novel. It does not delve into medical or clinical research regarding skin conditions.

Review of the Literature

It is suitable to commence this exploration of how literature has depicted skin conditions and their effect on one's identity by examining the novel in question. 'How to Disappear Completely' by Ali Standish, as reviewed by Fire (n.d.), presents an opportunity to explore the nuanced experiences of its protagonist, Emma, who grapples with a visible skin condition. Through Emma's narrative, the novel provides a window into the emotional landscape of self-identity and self-acceptance in the face of adversity.

Understanding the psychological impact of skin conditions is essential in the context of literature that explores themes of identity and self-acceptance. Tuckman (2017) discusses the potential psychological impact of skin conditions, shedding light on the emotional challenge individuals may face. This insight lays the groundwork for comprehending the depth of the experiences portrayed in literature.

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The idea of stigma, especially in regards to visible skin conditions, is of great importance in our comprehension of the issues faced by characters in books. Germain et al. (2021) gave a thorough examination of stigma related to visible skin conditions, proposing a conceptual framework that explicates the intricate nature of societal perspectives. This conceptual model can serve as a lens through which to analyze how authors convey stigma in literary works.

Vitiligo, a skin condition often characterized by visible depigmentation, offers a specific lens through which to examine skin-related literature. Liu et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analytic review highlighting the high comorbidity of anxiety among patients with vitiligo. This research underscores the importance of exploring the psychological aspects of skin conditions within literature.

Building upon the insights regarding vitiligo, Ezzedine et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review, delving into the psychosocial effects of the condition. The results of their research give insight into the emotional and social aspects of dealing with a skin condition that can be seen, which is echoed in works of literature.

The concept of body positivity and self-acceptance extends beyond literature and into the realm of social media and contemporary culture. Reif, Miller, & Taddicken (2022) analyze women's self-presentation on social media platforms, offering insights into the discourse of self-acceptance and body positivity. This broader context informs discussions about the role of literature in challenging societal norms.

To supplement the literary analysis, Haye (2022) provides a reading list focused on vitiligo. This resource provides further literary works that investigate the effects of having a visible skin issue, offering possible approaches to compare with How to Disappear Completely.

All these materials combined serve to provide us with a better understanding of the way skin conditions are portrayed in literature and how authors use these portrayals to communicate ideas about identity, stigma, and self-acceptance. The ensuing analysis aims to bridge the insights gained from these academic and literary perspectives, shedding light on the transformative potential of literature in fostering empathy and understanding.

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Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis methodology to explore the portrayal of stigma, in literature, with a specific focus on the novel 'How to Disappear Completely' by Ali Standish qualitative literary analysis is an interpretive approach that seeks to uncover the nuanced themes, character interactions and character development, within the text. This study aims to understand how skin conditions in literature show themes related to identity, stigma, and self-acceptance in literary works. The approach chosen for the analysis of this text is based on textual analysis while the theoretical lens is based on stigmatization and identity theory given by Erving Goffman.

Erving Goffman, as a sociologist, explored the concept of stigma in his seminal work Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963). Goffman's view was that stigma is a disgraceful attribute that sets a person apart from the norm and devalues them, transforming them from an ordinary person into a disrespected and diminished one. Stigmas can be categorized into three types:

- **Abominations of the Body**: Stigmas related to physical deformities or disabilities.

- **Blemishes of Individual Character**: Stigmas related to perceived moral or character flaws, such as criminality or addiction.

- **Tribal Stigmas:** Stigmas related to a person's race, nation, religion, or other social groups. (Goffman, 2009)

Goffman presented the idea of a "stigmatized identity." People who bear this stigma usually devise ways to handle their tainted identity. They manipulate the way others perceive them, following what Goffman called "managing impressions," in order to prevent being ostracized from society. Goffman's research puts the focus on how identity is created socially and the impact of societal views on how people view themselves and other people. People who are stigmatized often face mistreatment, preconceived ideas and the challenge of dealing with social situations where being who they are may be a source of discomfort or prejudice. (Bos et. al., 2013)

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In Lee Thomas's memoir, Turning White published in 2007, the author brings to light both the physical and mental hardships surrounding vitiligo, a skin disorder that has become a large part of his life. Goffman's theory on stigma is evident as Thomas describes the transformation of his identity, both in terms of physical appearance and societal interactions. The visible manifestation of vitiligo, turning Thomas' skin white, becomes a symbolic marker that distinguishes him from societal norms. As a TV broadcaster, Thomas grapples not only with the physical implications of the disease but also with the social consequences. The application of makeup to cover up the signs of vitiligo brings to light Goffman's concept of "impression management" - Thomas carefully manages the information he reveals to the public in order to regulate how he is perceived. The avoidance of eye contact by people who have known him for years underscores the unjust amplification of vitiligo in society. The stigma attached to the condition leads to a shift in how others perceive Thomas, exemplifying Goffman's notion of a "spoiled identity." This memoir provides an insightful look into the struggles experienced by people whose identity is associated with a stigmatized condition, like vitiligo, in a culture that tends to unfairly emphasize these discrepancies.

The data presented above in conclusion is strong research methodology and connects the research concern—stigma in literature—to broader sociological concepts of stigmatization and identity, as articulated by Goffman. The inclusion of a concrete example allows the theoretical framework to be seen as something that is applicable to daily life, helping to create a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between literature, stigma, and identity.

Data Analysis

The analysis aims to unravel the nuanced themes, character dynamics, and societal implications embedded in Emma's journey. In the following sections, we explore the complexities of Emma's experience with vitiligo, including her character development, interactions, flashbacks, and the social implications of the story.

❖ Character Development

Characterization of Emma, the protagonist, evolves as the story progresses. She is initially portrayed as self-conscious about her skin condition, and her journey toward self-acceptance becomes central to her character development.

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'The spot appears on the morning of Gram's funeral. It arrives unannounced and uninvited, like a fly buzzing around a picnic. Not that my life is a picnic today.' (Chapter 1)

The above-mentioned quote from the book enlightens us about how Emma, as a growing teen, seems to dislike sudden change. We can also say that she seems alarmed by change as if it's a fly that has come to her party as an uninvited guest. Her discovering the patch of skin losing color upon the passing away of her Grandma indicates the beginning of an emotional turmoil, hinting at the intricate play of personal loss and her transformative journey.

"I don't have what the people in those pictures have. I can't. I just have a couple of white spots that are probably there because Mom switched detergents or something. They'll be gone in a day or two." (Chapter 5)

The novel's later sections vividly illustrate Emma's strength and maturity, as she learns to confront the obstacles posed by societal conventions and her own personal issues. Her acceptance of the vitiligo is a powerful indicator of her inner strength, signifying an important transformation in her character and a newfound sense of self-assurance.

"Are you sure you—?" Mom starts. Anger bubbles up inside me. I should have known Mom would react like this. I push back my chair so suddenly that Boomer startles and skulks away upstairs. "It's my face, Mom," I say. "Not yours. And I can do what I want with it." "Emma, I just—" "Mom," Lily mutters. "Emma's right," Dad says, then turns to me. "You look great, hon." (Chapter 30)

At first portrayed as feeling anxious about her appearance, the investigation examines pivotal moments, such as when she noticed the blemish on the morning of Gram's memorial service. This pivotal event serves as a lens to explore Emma's evolving self-perception and the journey toward self-acceptance. Her internal monologues and reactions to the revelation of vitiligo, which was a skin condition, provide insights into the complexities of her character development and the way she struggles to understand herself and the world around her.

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❖ Character Interactions

The first-person narrative perspective allows readers to access Emma's inner thoughts and emotions, providing a deep insight into her personal struggles and self-perception.

The spot appears on the morning of Gram's funeral. It arrives unannounced and uninvited, like a fly buzzing around a picnic. Not that my life is a picnic today. Or maybe the spot has been there for a while, and I just haven't noticed. Maybe the only reason I notice the little white circle now is because I've been staring at my lap ever since I sat down in the front pew. (Chapter 1)

"What are these spots?" she asks. "These places where your skin is white?" ... "I don't know, Mom," I say. I put my palms to my face and I begin to cry. Then Mom is there, wrapping me up in her arms and making calming noises. And I know she's trying to make me feel better, but all I can think is that I wish she were Gram. (Chapter 5)

Flashbacks and recollections provide enhanced depth to the story, giving readers insight into Emma's affliction and how it has shaped her family's relationship. The mentioned quote below can be seen as an example:

I wince. I had a special connection? Now that Gram's gone, is that gone, too? An image flashes through my mind of the frayed tire swing rope over the river that snapped in two one summer when I tried to kick too high, sending me plunging into the water. (Chapter 3)

❖ Societal Connotations with Skin Diseases

The recurring imagery of masks and disguises serves as a symbolic representation of Emma's attempts to hide her condition from others, reflecting the theme of concealment and self-identity.

Then, "Your spots could be lots of things, you know," he says. "A fungus or something." (chapter 13). This quote highlights the fact that having a slight difference in appearance in the modern-day society may lead to negative connotations that are not conventionally found pleasing.

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If my white patches keep spreading, people might be staring at me for the rest of my life. If I spent my life being bothered by what other people thought of me, I'd never get anything else done, would I? Gram says in my head. (Chapter 14)

Then she and Mom talked for a long time about all these different creams and light treatments where I would go into this stand-up booth and have a specific type of light shined on me. Something about that kind of light can sometimes help bring color back to people's skin. (Chapter 14)

The above-mentioned quotes from chapter 4 examine situations in detail including conversations about potential explanations and solutions for vitiligo, in order to address the false beliefs that have become widely accepted in society. Emma's personal battle, influenced by beliefs in the community, is closely examined.

The theme of stigma becomes evident as Emma encounters various reactions from her peers and others in the community. This stigma is portrayed through both explicit acts of discrimination and more subtle instances of exclusion.

It's funny. Before I got vitiligo, I never understood how Mom and Lily spent so long looking at themselves in the mirror. I guess it was easy not to care what I looked like until I looked . . . different. (Chapter 30)

This section of the research offers a thorough analysis of Ali Standish's "How to Disappear Completely," detailing the changes in character, the interactions between characters, the inclusion of flashbacks, and the implications for the wider society. This text provides a profound insight into the difficulties of living with vitiligo as well as the social consequences of discrimination.

Conclusion

In conclusion, How to Disappear Completely transcends the confines of fiction to offer a profound exploration of skin conditions, identity, stigma, and self-acceptance. Through qualitative literary analysis, we discern the intricate narrative techniques and symbolic elements that make the novel a powerful vehicle for empathy and understanding. This novel encourages readers to think critically about their ideas of identity, and helps to break down the barriers created by stereotypes and bias based on physical characteristics. Ultimately, it shows how

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literature has the power to open our eyes to new perspectives, inspire compassion, and honour individual uniqueness.

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